



## Kumiko coffee table

A GOOD LESSON IN LESS IS MORE

BY JON BILLING

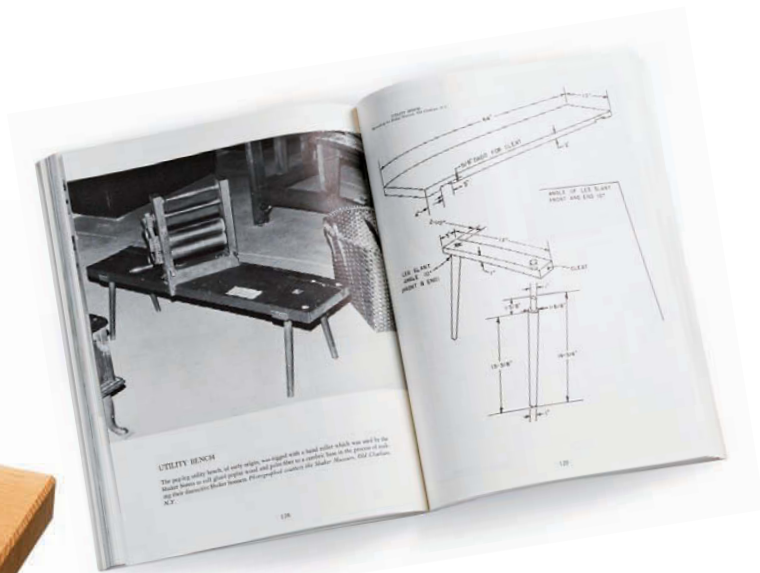
I've always been attracted to the quiet gridwork of shoji screens as well as to the delicate decorative patterns that often embellish them. Wanting to use the potential of these patterns in a new way led me to think about how I could incorporate kumiko—the thin strips of wood within a shoji's frame—in the surface of a table.

My first attempt turned out to be a false start. For that table I envisioned essentially laying a shoji screen flat and sticking legs onto it. Since the only real structural part of a shoji screen is the surrounding frame, it was a challenge to find a way to attach the legs. My solution was to push the legs to the outside edges of the table. This plan never quite sat right with me, but I proceeded nonetheless, doing drawings both by hand and in

SketchUp, and building a partial mockup. In the end, I decided that the table was too complex.

Mulling what I had learned from that initial design, I sat down to do some more sketches. I also started scouring through books looking for inspiration. In a book on Shaker furniture, I found a simple utility bench that really struck me. The bench had splayed legs attached to cleats, and the cleats were dadoed into a plank seat. I really liked the legs, which looked much more graceful and dynamic than the legs in my previous design. The simplicity of both the design and construction of the utility bench appealed to me.

Returning to SketchUp, I started to redesign the coffee table, incorporating ideas from the utility bench and toning down



**Plenty of structure.** To create a strong table despite the lacy strip of kumiko running right down the middle, Billing used sliding dovetailed cleats to connect the halves of the top. His inspiration for the leg and cleat design came from a table in John G. Shea's book, *Making Authentic Shaker Furniture* (Dover Woodworking, 2012).

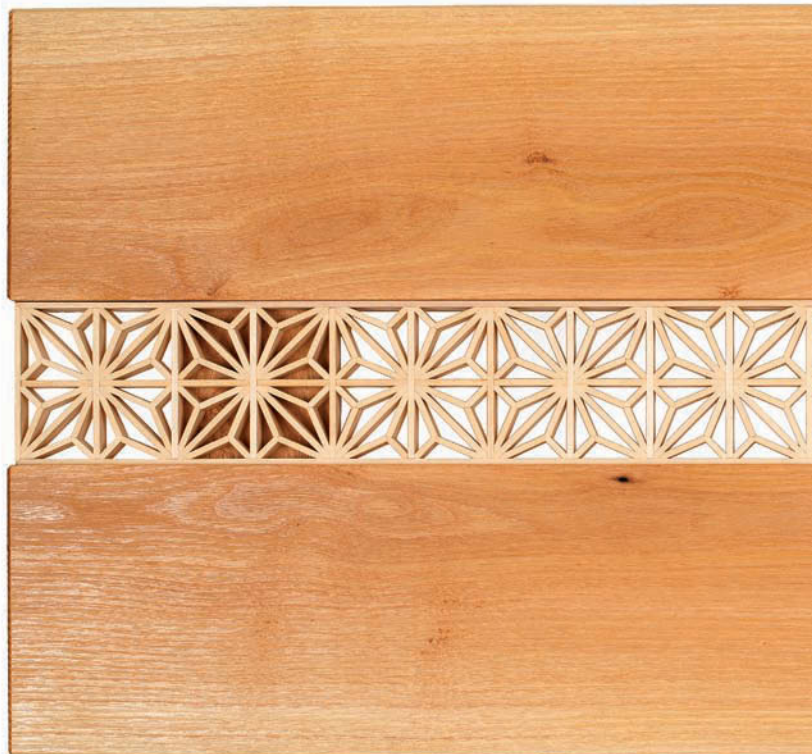


the kumiko pattern. I found that a single strip of kumiko down the center of the table reduced the busyness that I disliked in my original design and actually focused more attention on the pattern. It was a good lesson in less is more. Reducing the kumiko to a narrow strip also meant that I could use wide boards to make up the rest of the table surface, giving me more structure and better options for attaching the legs.

While mulling over these new ideas for the table design, I was also thinking about the wood I wanted to use. I had a few nice boards of black locust in my shop that I had been wanting to put to use. Black locust is an incredibly hard and tough wood, and I figured it would be great for a high-use piece of furniture like a coffee table. The wood for the kumiko pattern is Alaskan yellow cedar, a common wood for kumiko work because it planes beautifully and has very even grain.

Structurally, the table is closely modeled on the Shaker utility bench. The legs are tenoned and wedged into cleats, and the cleats are dovetailed into the two halves of the top. The cleats do all the structural work, holding the two halves of the top and the legs together, while the kumiko pattern simply rests in place on a shallow rabbet cut into the inner edge of each half of the top. The strip of kumiko is set  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. below the surface of the table to accommodate a piece of glass that protects it and makes the whole top of the table usable and easy to clean. The traditional kumiko design I chose is the *asanoha*, or hemp leaf, pattern.

Since you can see through the kumiko, I needed to size and space the cleats so that they would end up underneath the *asanoha* pattern in a clean way. I decided to make the cleats the same width as one leaf of the *asanoha* pattern, and placed them directly below the second leaf from each end. That way, when you look down on the table, the cleats coordinate with the kumiko pattern instead of clashing with it. □



Jon Billing runs Big Sand Woodworking in Red Hook, Brooklyn, N.Y.